

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)

WHAT IS IT?

Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) is a serious, sometimes deadly, infectious disease. It was first reported in Asia in February 2003. SARS is caused by a previously unrecognized coronavirus called SARS-associated coronavirus, (SARS-CoV). Coronaviruses are a group of viruses that look like a halo or crown when seen under a microscope.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SARS?

The illness usually begins with a high fever (measured temperature that is greater than 100.4°F). The fever is sometimes associated with chills or other symptoms, including headache, general feeling of discomfort, and body aches. Some people also experience mild respiratory symptoms at the outset. Diarrhea is seen in about two of every 10 people with SARS.

After two to seven days, SARS patients may develop a dry cough that may progress to a condition in which not enough oxygen is getting into the blood. As a result, 10 to 20 percent of people who have SARS require help from a machine to breathe. Most people who have SARS develop pneumonia.

Health care providers diagnose SARS based on the symptoms and the likelihood that a person has been exposed to SARS. Laboratory tests are available to confirm the diagnosis. The results of these tests take several days to several weeks.

HOW IS SARS SPREAD?

The primary way that SARS is spread is by close person-to-person contact. SARS-CoV is most often spread by respiratory droplets (droplet spread). Droplets are produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes and can travel a short distance (generally up to three feet) through the air. In this manner the particles can enter the mouth, nose, or eyes of persons who are nearby. The virus can also spread when a person touches a surface or object that has been contaminated with infectious droplets and then touches his or her mouth, nose, or eye(s). In addition, it is possible that SARS-CoV might be spread through the air (airborne spread). Close contact with an infected person has the highest risk of spreading SARS to others.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO BECOME SICK ONCE EXPOSURE TO SARS-CoV HAS OCCURRED?

The time between exposure to SARS-CoV and the start of symptoms is typically two to seven days. In some cases, it has been as long as 10 days.

HOW LONG IS A PERSON WITH SARS CONTAGIOUS?

Available information suggests that people who have SARS can spread SARS-CoV to others from the time symptoms, such as fever or cough, begin. SARS is most contagious later in the course of illness when most persons are likely to be hospitalized. Persons who are suspected to have SARS should avoid contact with other people until 10 days after SARS symptoms have gone away.

WHAT MEDICAL TREATMENT IS RECOMMENDED FOR PATIENTS WITH SARS?

People who are suspected to have SARS receive the same treatment as other people who have serious pneumonia. No SARS vaccine has yet been developed and no anti-viral medicines have been shown to be effective in preventing or treating SARS-CoV infection.

HOW CAN RESPIRATORY DISEASES, INCLUDING SARS, BE PREVENTED?

If you have a respiratory infection, the following steps can help prevent the spread of the illness to others.

1. Maintain good personal hygiene. Cover your nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing.
2. Keep your hands clean. Wash hands when they come in contact with all body fluids including respiratory secretions.
3. Avoid touching the eyes, nose and mouth. When you must touch your eyes, nose, and mouth, wash your hands first.
4. Stay away from others if you develop respiratory symptoms.
5. Do not share items such as cigarettes, towels, lipstick, toys, or other items that are likely to be contaminated with respiratory secretions.
6. Clean up surfaces contaminated with body fluids promptly with a good disinfectant solution. Follow the manufacturers' instructions when using any disinfectant, and wear gloves.
7. Do not share food or drink with others.
8. Use serving utensils at meal times.
9. Use dishwashers and washing machines to clean dishes or clothes that are usually washed by hand. They will provide a higher level of cleaning than if you clean these items by hand.
10. Make sure that bathrooms are always stocked with soap and disposable paper towels or hand dryers.
11. Promptly dispose of used tissue paper in a waste receptacle.
12. Provide good air ventilation to indoor spaces. Consider opening a window to let in extra air.
13. Improve your body's natural defense against disease by eating a balanced diet, getting rest, and by not smoking.
14. Consult your doctor promptly if you develop respiratory symptoms, and follow instructions given by your doctor including the use of drugs as prescribed and adequate rest as appropriate.
15. If you go to a medical facility and are coughing, wear a mask while you are waiting to see a health care provider (the medical facility will provide the mask). This will protect other patients from your germs if you are infectious.

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE SARS?

If you think that you have SARS, you should visit your usual health care provider. If possible, call ahead and tell your health care provider about the illness and about the possibility that you could have SARS. Stay home from work, school and other public activities until Public Health and your health care provider notify you that it is safe to resume your normal activities. When you arrive at your health care provider's office, ask for a surgical mask or tissue

and ask to be isolated away from other patients while you are waiting. If the health care provider suspects that you have SARS, you will be encouraged to wear a surgical mask to protect the health of other patients and to protect the health of persons who are at home.

WHAT IS PUBLIC HEALTH DOING ABOUT SARS?

Public Health works in several ways to deal with SARS:

- Increasing public and health care provider awareness in order to detect, investigate, and respond to cases early.
- Educating the public about prevention and control activities.
- Updating the public about the occurrence of SARS.
- Collaborating with state, federal, and international health authorities to contribute to the collective knowledge about how to deal with SARS.
- In the event that SARS is suspected or confirmed, Public Health will define and enforce measures to prevent the spread of infection within the community. These steps include keeping SARS patients and their contacts confined in their homes, in hospitals, or in designated health care facilities until Public Health can confirm that they are no longer infectious to other people.

WHERE CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION ABOUT SARS?

Additional information about SARS is available at the Public Health website, www.metrokc.gov/health, the CDC website, www.cdc.gov, and the WHO website www.who.org.